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Santa Rosa County
Cooperative Extension Service

Teen Court is in Session

Hear Ye, Hear Ye Court is in session with the Honorable... Does this sound like a scene from an old "Perry Mason" or one of the modern "Judge Whatchamacallit" television shows? Well it could be, but it is also a statement that is heard almost every Monday night at the Santa Rosa County Teen Court.

Teen Court is a program that allows first time juvenile misdemeanor offenders to be tried by a jury of their peers. It is a nonjudicial diversionary program which is an alternative to formal prosecution. Youth offenders who participate in the program must first admit their guilt and then abide by the sanctions imposed by a jury of their peers. Upon successful completion of the program the youth offender's charges are dismissed.

The Teen Court program is one of those win win situations where everyone benefits. It provides an opportunity for youth to be responsible for their actions. The rate of recidivism is much lower (less than 10%) for youth offenders who participate in the Teen Court program than it is for youth offenders who are processed through the formal juvenile court system. And, the cost of the Teen Court program to the community is much less than that of the formal juvenile court.

Another benefit of the Teen Court program is its unique method of using teens in roles of responsibility. Teen volunteers serve as attorneys, jurors, bailiff and clerk. Teen Court is not just a program for juvenile offenders. It is also a program that allows interested youth to learn about the American justice and legal systems. Most of the youth who serve as Teen Court volunteers have never been involved with the law, and

they have never seen the inside of a courtroom.

So why are Santa Rosa County 4-H'ers involved in Teen Court? Many Santa Rosa County 4-H members participate in the Teen Court program because it allows them to "Learn By Doing." While many of the 4-H'ers are interested in law related careers others simply enjoy volunteering. All of the 4-H'ers enjoy learning about the justice system as they serve as Defense Attorneys, Prosecuting Attorneys, Bailiff or Clerk of the Court.

Santa Rosa County 4-H members have become so interested and involved in the Teen Court program that a 4-H Citizenship club has been formed. Middle and high school age youth who are members of the 4-H Citizenship Club serve as regular volunteers for the Teen Court program. Teen Court is their 4-H project. The 4-H members consider it a privilege to participate in Teen Court and enjoy the opportunities to put citizenship into action.

The Santa Rosa County Teen Court program is administered by Lutheran Services of Florida. Sherry Hardin is the Coordinator of the Teen Court program and Vicki Sulzbach is the Case Manager. For additional information regarding the Santa Rosa County Teen Court program call 626-4730.

All youth who serve as Teen Court Volunteers participate in a training program. They learn how to be a juror, how to be a defense or prosecuting attorney, bailiff or clerk. They learn how to make opening and closing statements, question witnesses and make objections. While much of the training is done "on the job" as they volunteer, training sessions are also conducted for interested youth.

The Santa Rosa County 4-H Citizenship Club is co-sponsoring the next LSF Teen Court training session on Monday October 9, 2000, from 4:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. at the Milton Court House. Members of the 4-H Citizenship Club have been helping to recruit new Teen Court volunteers and will host a pizza party following the training. Any middle and high school age youth interested in learning more about the Teen Court program or serving as a Teen Court Volunteer is encouraged to attend this training. For additional information please call LSF Teen Court Coordinator Sherry Hardin or Case Manager Vicki Sulzbach (626-4730) or for 4-H information call Vickie B. Mullins at 623-3868 or 939-1259, Extension 1360 (for south county residents).

4-H programs and activities in Santa Rosa County are open to boys and girls ages 5 to 18 regardless of race, color, creed, religion, national origin, sex or handicap.